



A GRASSROOTS MANIFESTO

Around the world, the cutting edge of social change is happening at the grassroots level. At The Global Fund for Children, our priority is to make sure this change has every possible chance to grow, to thrive, and to fundamentally disturb the landscape of poverty on this earth.

Grassroots organizations are different—they are the home team. They steadfastly focus on the challenges in their communities because that's what they face every day. They understand the unique needs, resources, and obstacles that surround them.

That's why we are committed to supporting change at the grassroots level. But

it's also why grassroots grantmaking requires a different approach than top-down charity models. On their own, these organizations are small, nimble, tenacious, and inspiring. They are also fragile, and burdened by the very circumstances they are fighting to transform. And their potential to change the world is worth everything we've got.

More and more, we are asked how we make grassroots grantmaking work. With 19 years of experience in the field, we've boiled it down to five essentials for excelling in the most exciting philanthropy happening today—and for becoming a true partner at the grassroots.

As a true partner, you assist at every step so they can become bigger, stronger, and more sustainable.

1) LEAD BY FOLLOWING.

There is no greater expert on a particular community than the community itself. This is not the time for you to direct—this is the time to listen, to support, and to build trust. An indigenous organization may not look like much on the surface. They may not have a business card, or own a permanent office space. But looks can be deceiving, and the best organizations have identified a pressing need in their community and are already working on solutions.

At first glance, one of our grassroots partners in Uganda, the Nyaka AIDS Orphans Project, appears to be a typical rural primary school with brightly painted cinderblock walls and a corrugated metal roof on a small compound. But this school is something special. Its founder, Jackson Kaguri, saw the way the AIDS epidemic was ravaging the community—orphanhoo had become normal, and the community was dotted with child-headed households and overburdened elders caring for their grandchildren. Kaguri created

a school for these orphans that emphasizes quality education and psychosocial support. Upon close examination, the school's extraordinary distinctions become evident—the produce from its surrounding vegetable gardens is shared with the caregivers; teachers integrate healing pride into the curriculum; and the children rebuild aspirations and opportunities.

The grassroots organization is just one expert here. So are the people who benefit from the organization's work. At GFC, when we scout for a new grantee, we walk the neighborhood with the organization's director. How many people know the director by name, or better yet, invite him or her into their homes? And, even more importantly for us, what do the kids think? During our scouting to find the brightest stars, we've seen where children are the passive recipients of charity, and where they exude childhood joy and agency despite all obstacles. The latter is the real deal.

2) BUILD TRUST LIKE IT'S YOUR JOB (BECAUSE IT IS).

Your success and your grantee's success are inextricably bound, which means building and maintaining trust is crucial. Listening to what your partners need is a big part of it, but not the whole picture.

Grassroots organizations are small, with little bureaucratic experience—maybe they've never even written a grant proposal before. Is the proposal a test or a means to an end? With grassroots grantmaking, it should be the latter—a capacity-building process that helps these organizations to articulate their vision and model and begin to demonstrate their impact. As a true partner, you assist at every step so they can become bigger, stronger, and more sustainable.

Of course, this trust has to be mutual, with accountability structures in place to keep expectations out in the open. Communication is the key, so establish dialogue (rather than punishment) as the norm. For instance, being accountable doesn't necessarily mean

hitting all goals right on schedule. If your partner is struggling, talk about what is holding them back. You might very well have the tools to help them overcome their challenges.

If one of our partners misses a deadline, or experiences a sudden drop in budget, we want to know why—not only for accountability's sake, but also so we can figure out the next step together. Transitions in leadership or the loss of a major funder can dramatically affect a small organization. Because we believe our partners' success is also our own, we do everything we can to help them soften the impact of such setbacks and use these events as learning opportunities.

After all—success isn't just about you or the grassroots organization itself, but about all of the beneficiaries as well. They are your mission. Remember that, and your partnerships will be more transparent, rewarding, and fruitful.

When you can recognize greatness in its earliest forms and help it to grow into something sustainable, the rewards are incredible.

3) RISK HAS TWO SIDES—GET COMFORTABLE WITH BOTH.

As a funder in grassroots grantmaking, you assume more risk than if you invested in a large aid organization. That's both the beauty and the rub—you're searching for a diamond in the rough. Funding undiscovered organizations demands that you be the first supporter and put your name—and your money—behind the ad-hoc operation they have courageously begun. Grassroots grantmaking is built on the premise that nothing important happens in this world until someone takes the first step, however small.

It's a step we find so important that we make a point of being the first major US-based funder for at least 80 percent of our new grantees. And this support is more than money—we also give the organization credibility that can be leveraged for more recognition and funding. For every dollar we invest, our grantees raise an additional seven dollars in capital from other sources.

So get comfortable with risk—but mitigate it. Managing risk is what philanthropists should do. We have the capacity to invest when others cannot. The task is to know when the risk is worth taking. That means

doing your homework: know your partners' leaders, understand their ambitions, walk their neighborhoods, and keep asking questions. Over the course of the funding relationship, managing risk requires appropriate levels of monitoring and reporting, as well as a system for flagging any issues early on. It also means knowing when to stay even though a partner is struggling, and when to leave if the partner is failing. Not every stone will be a diamond after all.

When you can recognize greatness in its earliest forms and help it to grow into something sustainable, the rewards are incredible. When GFC began supporting The YP Foundation in India, the organization was at an early stage—youth-led with more ambition than resources, and more steadfast grit than solid financial and operating systems. Five years later, TYPF's budget has grown by 1,000 percent. Now a thriving organization with 11 staff members, 300 volunteers, and a diverse set of large and small funders, TYPF has been recognized as a global model for youth development and empowerment. It's only when you are willing to take the risk that you experience triumphs like this.

4) REMOVE BARRIERS, BOTH LARGE AND SMALL.

When you're working with grassroots organizations, you'll find no shortage of ground-breaking, awe-inspiring, revolutionary ideas. The ideas are there, but because these are small organizations, the obstacles are immense, and every external disturbance can have profound effects. A funder's role is to remove barriers so those fledgling ideas can take root, grow, and thrive.

Barriers come in all forms. Maybe at first it's the grant proposal itself—so guide them through it. Or maybe what your grantee needs isn't the most glamorous assistance—help them pay rent on their office if that will keep their programs going, even if it doesn't make a good story for your board. Maybe the organization's director could benefit from a conference on NGO management or public speaking, but there's

no extra cash for that after program expenses—step in and give them that chance.

An unfortunately common barrier comes in the form of unexpected emergencies. In the developing world, grassroots organizations and the communities they serve are especially vulnerable to natural disaster, war, and civil unrest. When mass flooding in Thailand washed out the road between a refugee camp and our grantee partner's school for refugee children, we provided funding to help them respond. Just \$2,000 from us meant the children could receive food assistance and keep going to class—and our grantee didn't have to dip into the program budget to get things back on track. It's your job to help your partners do what they do best—so clear the path of whatever might hold them back.



5) BUILD SKILLS FOR THE LONG HAUL.

Sustainability is quite the buzzword these days. But when it comes to grassroots grantmaking, it's the difference between charity and philanthropy. If cash is the only thing you provide to your grantees, you are setting them up to fail after you're gone.

We've found that many grassroots organizations are led by passionate, ambitious visionaries. Many of these leaders grew up under the very challenges they are fighting to change, and have overcome incredible odds. But more often than not, strategic planning is a new and daunting task. The tools that make any organization successful (even your own) are the same tools your partners need—skills in organizational development, human resources, fundraising, and networking.

So help your partners run and expand their programs, but do more than that. At GFC, we have

developed a tool specifically designed to measure the organizational capacity of grassroots groups across multiple indicators. This tool helps us to track our grantees' growth as well as our own impact as a grantmaker. Additionally, our grantees build skills in evaluating and addressing their own strengths and weaknesses.

We also convene our partners for regional conferences so they can meet, network with, and learn from their peers. We offer special grants for organizational development, and for opportunities like professional trainings. We tell the world about their leaders, their programs, and their impact; nominate them for awards; and introduce them to other funders.

These acts are just as important as the cold, hard cash that keeps the lights on. And you'll soon realize they are just as meaningful, too.

MAKE IT HAPPEN

Grassroots grantmaking supports local, lasting solutions. It's authentic to the ethos of real change at the community level. Witnessing and facilitating this change is bold and risky. It's not linear—in fact, it's often messy. It's not glamorous, but it has a unique natural beauty. With over \$29 million invested, and nearly two decades of experience, we have experienced vastly more triumphs than trials. And we're here to tell you it's worth it—if you do it well. Join us!